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Just Plain Dumb

BURLINGTON, Vt.—Louis V. Gerstner Jr., the chairman of IBM and the man who has engineered its recent turnaround, had a message for the nation's governors when he appeared before their annual summer meeting here this week. Warning that real reform requires resources, Gerstner said, "True change agents put their money where their mouth is."

That message has broad application, not only to the governors but to the self-styled revolutionaries in Washington, who often appear to be letting their budgetary goals predetermine the way they are reshaping programs and agencies.

But there is particular pertinence for one small program that has been a bipartisan project of the governors and now is threatened by small-minded economizers in Congress.

A decade ago, farsighted governors of both parties, including both Bill Clinton of Arkansas and his would-be 1996 Republican opponent, Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, launched a program to raise the achievement standards in American schools. Their "national goals" effort was embraced by President Bush in 1989 at his "education summit" in Charlottesville, Va. Last year, it was written into "Goals 2000" legislation by Congress with strong support from President Clinton.

A small but critical piece of the law was the creation of the National Education Goals Panel to ride herd on the project.

Now the House Republicans have moved to kill the entire Goals 2000 program, including the $2.7 million for the goals panel. Even before they heard Gerstner, the governors were saying that strangling this effort is dumb.

That is the view not just of long-time education advocates such as North Carolina's Jim Hunt and Colorado's Roy Romer, both Democrats, but of conservative reformers such as Wisconsin's Tommy Thompson and Michigan's John Engler, both Republicans.

Thompson told me that because so few of the governors who met with Bush in 1989 to launch this campaign are still around, and because few businessmen are as committed to the cause as Gerstner, "we need to jump-start this effort again."

Thompson and Romer both acknowledge that whether they like it or not, the federal grants to states for Goals 2000 programs are likely victims of the budget-cutters. But the goals panel is, in Thompson's words, "the catalyst" and the forum that is needed to keep the effort going.

The governors' original notion was a simple one: In a competitive world, the quality of the education America's youngsters receive is the prime determinant of the nation's future well-being. So they set out goals for themselves. Among others, they said, by 2000, all children would start school ready to learn and at least 90 percent of them would finish high school. Every graduate would have demonstrated competence in nine basic subjects.

Why would Congress want to kill our best hope for setting higher standards in the schools?

No one could argue with the goals. But by setting their deadline so far in the future, Gerstner said, the governors "left a little bit too much . . . cover" for themselves. And, he pointedly said, "Goals aren't worth a damn if you don't measure every day" how near or far the schools are from achieving them.

Last week, in a report that was as direct as Gerstner's speech, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) documented how far we are from being able to measure that progress.

While every state but Iowa has begun to develop tougher academic standards for its students, only 13 states have standards that are "clear and specific enough" to guide curriculum development. While 33 states have or are developing student assessments geared to those standards, only seven states require high school seniors to meet the standards set for 10th-, 11th- or 12th-graders in order to graduate.

The public has become skeptical about education "reforms" that are designed to provide comfort for teachers or students, instead of ensuring that knowledge and skills are actually acquired. This effort falls into the latter category.

The AFT wants an end to platitudes. Instead of saying that fifth-graders "should be able to use basic science concepts to help understand various kinds of scientific information," as one state does, the model should be another state's requirement that those 10-year-olds "should be able to describe the basic processes of photosynthesis and respiration and their importance to life."

That same kind of rigor is what the governors are seeking—and what the goals panel is all about.

Killing it would be one of the dumbest things Congress could do.